

Unima — the Marionette Union

DADI PUDUMJEE

Since we have been talking about strings — how many strings a puppet should have, and so on — I would like to start by presenting to you this old puppet of mine [*overleaf*]. It is fifteen or sixteen years old; it has been with me for years. It was made when I was learning puppetry [at the Marionette Theatre Institute, Stockholm]. I sketched it on paper and the puppet was made according to the design. It's a kind of caricature, not a character from a story or a play. It was made only as an exercise . . .

Now, how many strings should a puppet have? It all depends on the style one adopts. What kind of functions do you want in your puppet? The Rajasthan puppets have two strings, others have three or more. This puppet, with so many strings, has achieved a perfect balance. It is well controlled. The whole weight of the puppet rests on the strings attached to the puppet's shoulders . . . You can see there are joints in this puppet — in the hands, on the hips.

. . . A puppet-maker makes his puppets after his own style and fashion. I have attached two strings to the hands of this puppet alone. There could even be three strings in some puppets. Here [*shows the same puppet's head*], there are also two strings attached to the puppet's head.

DISCUSSION

A voice: Show us the hand movements.

Dadi Pudumjee: The hand movements are simple [*shows*], with two strings.

Komal Kothari: The head of this puppet is made of papier mâché; it is hollow. The body is made of wood.

A voice: There are also shoes?

Dadi Pudumjee: Inside the shoes, the feet are wooden. They are covered with leather. There is also a little lead for weight.

Komal Kothari: So that the legs don't wobble; so that the movements are controllable.

Dadi Pudumjee: Here, the string is not tied to the knee joint. The string passes *through* the knee joint. I will hang up the puppet so that you can see it properly.

G. Venu: Dadi, since you have been associated with Unima, tell us about string puppets in other countries.

Dadi Pudumjee: There are a number of countries where you have string puppets, especially countries in Central Europe. There, the puppets are quite similar to our own string and rod puppets. In Czechoslovakia, the puppets are smaller. Inside them, through the middle, runs



Dadi Pudumjee shows the puppet he made as a student.

a wire. There are also strings for the hands. They have developed this further in Germany and Japan. Whether it's a string, rod or glove puppet, they have refined it and raised the art to a sophisticated level.

There is only one problem that I see in India. We have good technique. We also make very good puppets. But puppets are not made just to look at; we also have to use them effectively. So we need to discuss problems of practice urgently.

Venuji told us this morning about a tradition which was dead; and the people working with him revived it. They had some models, and working on the basis of those, they revived the string puppets of Kerala. And while doing so, they made some changes which were advantageous. We have to take note of such work; it is very important. We should not be scared of making changes, saying that our tradition only allows two strings or three strings. But [*to the Rajasthan puppeteers*], if you are providing six strings for your puppets, you should ask yourselves why you need six strings. If they offer no advantage at all — if they are only for show — then it is useless to add more strings . . . We were talking about adding legs to Rajasthani puppets. If you are adding legs to them, they shouldn't be just for show; you have to use them. If there is no additional advantage, let the puppet remain as it was . . . You have a tradition — you should preserve it; it is not to be lost. At the same time, you must also strive to do something new. You must see what else you can do with your puppets. In what other ways can you manipulate them? The Jaipur puppeteers have added controls for manipulation. Some controls work properly, and some actually come in the way of manipulation. Traditionally, you manipulate with your fingers — without controls. And you do it very well. So you could consider what more you can do with your fingers, without [bothering to add] controls.

Bhanu Bharati: My question is, what should be our aim? To make our puppets replicas of humans, or to allow them to remain puppets? We have seen the work of [the German puppeteer] Albrecht Roser — he is using forty strings to manipulate one puppet; and we have also seen what he can do. His is a one-man show. Generally, when many puppets are used to narrate a story, and we make the puppets resemble humans, then we no longer have a puppet play.

Dadi Pudumjee: Well, all the puppet theatres of the world are closely related to the corresponding human theatres. You have a Kabuki theatre in Japan, and the [corresponding] Bunraku puppets. You have a Yakshagana theatre in India, and you also have Yakshagana puppets. So is the case with Kathakali. But when you hold a puppet in your hands, you can see that there are a number of things a puppet can do which a human cannot. The puppeteer has to take advantage of this . . . [On the other hand,] there are certain things in theatre which humans can do but puppets cannot. If you try to imitate human movements in the puppet theatre, you are finished! We were talking about this the other day with Suresh [Dutta]. When people see a lifelike movement, they exclaim, 'Look, now the puppet has opened its mouth; now it is rolling its eyes', and so on. But this attracts attention only for five or ten minutes: what happens afterwards? Then you are stuck in technical wizardry. So we always have to remember the spirit of puppets . . .

Here, I have been asked to talk about Unima [the Union Internationale de la Marionette]. It is the international union of marionettes, of which the Indian unit is called Bharatiya Putli

Sangh. Unima-India had been in slumber for the past few years. This March, fresh elections were held, and the late Meher Contractor took over as Chairperson. I am the President, G.Venu is Vice-President, the Secretary is Sushil Saxena; he is from Jaipur. The Treasurer is J. D. Virmani from Delhi; he was in NCERT [the National Council for Educational Research and Training] earlier. The Joint Secretary is Ratnamala Nori from Hyderabad. That is the new committee.

When there is a festival, a lot of people become members of Unima. And when nothing happens for two or three years, it ceases to be alive. The fee is something like eighty rupees. We have a newsletter [*Sutradhar*]. We don't have much money, so it is cyclostyled and sent out. But the problem is, we don't get information on what is happening all over the country. People are very quick to complain — we are not getting this, we are not getting that, and so on. I sent out a circular to all our paying members saying that we don't get sufficient information. If we could get enough information, we would publish it in the newsletter and send it to other puppeteers. But nobody is responding to the circular. It is very important for us to be in touch with each other; if there is a festival, or if somebody is doing something new, information must be sent to us.

The Unima world congress is held once in four years; Meherben and I had been to the last congress in Lubljana in Slovenia this year . . . I have become Vice-President of Unima's executive body. I have to coordinate all Unima activities in the Asia-Pacific region. There is a lot of interest in Indian puppetry in this region. Unima representatives from the region came to India and there was some interaction with them. But the problem in India is that everyone wants to attend festivals abroad. They try to use Unima to perform abroad. But this can't go on. People abroad have also realized that. They fell for the exotic appeal of our puppetry at the start. But now they know what a good performance [from India] is and what is not a good performance. So it is important that the quality of our productions should be high. When you take your troupe abroad, you must pay attention to this, because we face a lot of criticism about Indian performance and participation.

There are schools abroad at different places sponsored by Unima, and it's possible for our students to go and study there. Their courses are exhaustive, extending to four or five years. The fees are also quite high by Indian standards. It may be possible to get scholarships from the schools or grants from our government — I wouldn't know about that. But they insist that we send only those students who are really interested in puppetry and who will pursue the art [professionally].

There is another thing which I discussed with Venu a little while ago — the possibilities of starting regional centres for puppetry. Say, Suresh Dutta wants to go to South India to interact with Southern puppeteers. Existing institutions like Venu's could invite him. Some other institution could invite an artist from another region. And Unima could perhaps help such institutions to coordinate their exchange programmes. Are there any questions?

Bhanu Bharati: Unima has no money; everybody knows that. So can't you arrange some fund-raising programmes for the Union?

Dadi Pudumjee: Yes, we can. But, before that happens, Unima-India has to pay its dues to the international body. They tell us each member should pay a certain amount, though our fees in India are lower than the international fees. We are now paying only eighty rupees a

year. Even that amount stands due from seventy or eighty members out of a hundred and fifty. So only half the members are even paying their dues. That money is all spent on postage and cyclostyling expenses for the newsletter . . . We can certainly do some fundraising programmes, but the main problem is not so much of money, but of initiative. The participation that is needed just to keep the bulletin going — even that is not forthcoming. The problem is that members enrol and sit tight. Nothing happens after that . . .